

James J. Kilpatrick

Now they're picking on the Scientologists

A small army of FBI agents played another game of gangbusters last month with the Church of Scientology. By apparent actual count, 134 agents burst into three church offices in Washington and California. They hauled away tons of stuff. Now church leaders are fighting back.

Speaking simply as a taxpayer, I would say hooray for these scrappy reverends. They have sued the FBI, and they have just published a large book of documents having to do with the government's long campaign of harassment against them. Church lawyers pried the documents loose from a reluctant government by means of the Freedom of Information Act.

If the Scientologists' story were not so terrifying, it would have its comic aspects. But the story in fact is terrifying. Over a period of 23 years, commencing in 1954, the federal government has thrown its whole massive weight into a malicious persecution of this religious sect. A dozen dif-

ferent agencies have participated in the attack. Millions upon millions of tax dollars have been wasted. No statistician could compute the man hours of costly time that have been frittered away in blundering pursuit of these devotees.

For the record, I am as skeptical of the Scientologists — and as tolerant of their ideas — as I am of every other organized religion. Scientology may be a racket, as the government persistently contends, but this has never been proved as a matter of law. These people believe they have found a path to man's peace of mind; they profess to have founded an establishment of religion. And if church leaders seek rich converts, and milk them for large contributions, what else is new?

The story begins in 1954, when the United States Air Force, of all outfits, launched an investigation of Scientology in the area of Lowry Air Force Base in Colorado. The USAF Office of Special Investigation had some notion that the disciples were Communists,

homosexuals, or either, or both.

In 1959, the Food and Drug Administration began an attack that would go on for years. Why the FDA, you may ask? A fair question. The Scientologists use a simple skin galvanometer, which they call an E-meter, as an aid in their metaphysical healing programs. The FDA said the E-meter was a quack medical device, hence unlawful.

In 1960, the United States Army moved up some troops. The Scientologists' book includes a photostat of one Army Intelligence report. If that report is a fair sample of the intelligence of Army Intelligence, God help the American Republic.

In 1961, the Air Force renewed its forays. In 1962, the FDA and the Bureau of Customs gave the church a hard time. In January of 1963, two huge vans, escorted by motorcycle police, rolled up to church headquarters in Washington. Government agents seized three tons of material, including 5,000 books, 20,000 pamphlets,

and 65 of the devilish E-meters. It took 10 years of costly litigation before the courts held the raid an unconstitutional abuse of power.

In 1967, the Labor Department harassed the church by denying work permits to visiting ministers from abroad. The CIA checked in. The Post Office brought up its legions of postal inspectors, sniffing for mail fraud. The FBI kept surveilling away. The Immigration and Naturalization Service joined the fun.

Finally the government, having lost at every turn, threw the Internal Revenue Service into the breach. The IRS prepared whole pages of instruction for its agents' manual, dealing with special audits and investigations. The IRS now has 33 lineal feet of files on the sect, and all the government has for its trouble is a series of court rulings to the effect that Scientology is indeed a church as a matter of law.

Who's crazy? I ask you, seriously, now, who's nuts? These meter-reading rever-

ends? Or the government's klutzes who trample the First Amendment under foot?